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Riddles of Neo-liberal University Reform. The Student Protests of 2009 as Bologna's 'Stress Test'

Although higher education politics in Europe is usually not contested on the streets, in autumn 2009 the situation was suddenly different. Students in Austria and Germany organized huge public strikes and protests against the Bologna reforms, which intend to shorten the period of study while intensifying the frequency of exams. Furthermore, the Bologna reforms intend to introduce selection at the MA-level while introducing tuition fees. Rejecting all these changes, the students occupied buildings in almost every university town, receiving widespread publicity.¹ Around the turn of the year the protests died out again after a number of their demands had been met – in very general, vague terms – or had at least been declared 'negotiable' by the university administration. How this will work out in practice still remains to be seen.²

In the following contribution I will go into the sudden and open clash between the proponents and the critics of the Bologna reforms in 2009, because it would be strange to organize a conference about the Bologna reforms and not pay attention to the last student revolt against these reforms.

My paper is structured in three parts. In the first paragraph I will go into the new phase of the Bologna Reforms that started this year and comment on some typical similarities and differences with the first phase of Bologna, which started in 1999. I will refer to the present phase as Phase 2 and analyze its first major policy paper. In the second paragraph, I will go into the recent student protests against the Bologna reforms and into the student critique of the 'economization' of higher education.

1 See for example: Studentenproteste in Österreich Verschanzt im Audimax, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 27. 10. 2009; Proteste an Unis. Studenten machen ihrem Zorn Luft, in: *Der Spiegel*, 17. 11. 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/unispiegel/studium/0,1518,661871,00.html>; Streikbilanz, in: *Die Zeit* 22.12.2009, <http://www.zeit.de/2009/53/C-Seitenhieb>.

2 In the meantime, there are clear signs of 'restoration' and of a return to the Bologna normality. See for instance: Paradoxien der Hochschulsteuerung in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 21. 06. 2010. In this article the president of the FU Berlin suggests that the introduction of neo-liberal New Public Management at the German universities represents a 'modern', that is 'transparent' form of 'democratization' on basis of the argument that it represents the distribution of money on the basis of quantifiable Leistungskriterien.

I will argue that the official EU-discourse on education is so different from the discourse of the protesting students it is legitimate to talk of two different worlds in this respect. In the third and last paragraph I will go into the reactions of the university administrators and of the Bolognese politicians to the recent student protests. I will argue that their initial partial support of the students basically indicates that the student protests are well-founded and legitimate. So much for the structure of my paper.

This connection of my paper to the recent student protests implies that I will refrain here from a general conceptual and empirical analysis of the Bologna Program and its fundamental neo-liberal character. I have presented my arguments in a systematic form in other publications.³ In this paper I will predominantly argue on the basis of concrete examples furnished by press articles in 2009 and 2010.

1 'It's getting better all the time!' The 'Bologna Process' between 1999 and 2009 according to the policy makers.

Let me start by quoting from a recent communiqué, dated 28-29th. April 2009 and issued in Leuven, Belgium, from the Ministers of Education responsible for the follow-up to the Bologna Process, because this seems to be a good starting point.⁴

The first phase of the Bologna Process actually ended in 2009 – although this fact was not widely advertised and thus was hardly noticed – so since 2009 we have been in Phase 2, called 'Bologna 2020'. It is probable that the policymakers

3 See Chris Lorenz: *The Myth of the Dutch Middle Way. A True Story about the Dutch Mountains*, in: *Wissenschaftsrecht*, Bd. 33 (2000), 3, 189-209; Chris Lorenz: *Will the Universities survive the European Integration? Higher Education Policies in the EU and in the Netherlands before and after the Bologna Declaration*, in: *Sociologia Internationalis*, 44 (2006), 1, 123-153; Chris Lorenz (Hg.): *If you're so smart why aren't you rich?*, Universiteit, Markt & Management, Amsterdam 2008; Chris Lorenz: *Higher Education Policies in the European Union, the 'Knowledge Economy' and Neo-Liberalism*, in: Barak Kalir/Pál Nyíri (Hg.): *Evaluating Academia. Between Old Hierarchy and New Orthodoxy*, in: *Issue of EspacesTemps* 2010, <http://www.espacestemp.net/document8318.html>. (visited 23 July 2010); Chris Lorenz: *If you're so smart why are you under surveillance? Universities, Neoliberalism and New Public Management*, in: *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37 (2011), Fall issue.

4 The Bologna Process 2020 – The European Higher Education Area in the New Decade Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28.-29. 04. 2009, http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/leuven_louvain-la-neuve_communique%C3%A9_april_2009.pdf (visited 23 July 2010).

of the ‘Bologna Process’ were not too enthusiastic about the prospect of publicly drawing the balance of 10 years Bologna – and thus bringing up the question of original goals and results, not to mention the question of whether and how to continue. ‘Bologna 2020’ reformulates the main assumptions and objectives of Bologna Phase 1, remarkably without reflecting on any of the experiences of the first ten years of the Bologna Plan, nor asking why its policy objectives had not (or only very partially) been realized. As in most policy papers the past does not seem to count, only ‘The Bright Future’ does. ‘Bologna 2020’ is all about the ‘vital contribution’ which higher education in Europe has in ‘realising a Europe of knowledge’, a Europe that can be characterised as ‘highly creative and innovative’. This Europe can only be made possible by maximising the opportunities for students, according to the communiqué, so that they can maximise their ‘competences’ in a flexible, changing and globalised labour market.

Note that higher education is immediately defined as a direct function of the economy and of the labour market. This reduction of education to only economic considerations was also a characteristic feature of Bologna Phase 1.⁵ Besides this economic function Bologna Phase 2 is also meant to promote ‘active’ and ‘democratic citizenship’. There is no hint of how this goal is related to the primary, economic goals, however, and there is no mention of any form of democracy in the universities themselves – neither related to the faculty, nor related to the students. Instead the role of ‘societal stakeholders’ and especially the role of employers is stressed as far as ‘managing’ the university is concerned – as was the case in Bologna Phase 1.⁶

At the same time the communiqué claims that Bologna Phase 2 will stimulate ‘academic freedom’ – and this is supposedly ‘the good news’ because the very notion of academic freedom was blatantly missing in Bologna Phase 1. The ‘bad news’, however, is that ‘Bologna 2020’ provides no clue at all as to the question of how ‘academic freedom’ can be reconciled with the rule of the economic market over the universities and with the dominant influence of employers on university management. The basic fact that the economic agenda of ‘Bologna’ constitutes a fundamental threat to tenure and that tenure is a precondition to ‘academic freedom’ is nowhere touched upon.⁷ The attempts of British Petroleum to silence its

5 See Lorenz (Hg.), *If you’re so smart why aren’t you rich?*

6 See The Bologna Declaration, <http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna.pdf>, p.3: „The Declaration is a key document which marks a turning point in the development of European higher education“.

7 This is the case because tenured faculty is more expensive and less ‘flexible’ than untenured faculty, and ‘Bologna’ is aiming for permanently increasing staff ‘flexibility’ and ‘efficiency’, meaning cutting down costs. For similar neo-liberal developments in the US see Carry Nelson,

own scientists regarding the gigantic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico (and the attempts to ‘clean up’ at least the photographic information on the spill) only represent the most recent example of the basic connection between economic dependency and the absence of freedom of information and of free speech.⁸

Where economic and political interests collide with the truth, these interests usually prevail and the truth is repressed – which was the very reason why tenure for faculty was introduced in the past. No wonder that now neo-liberal politics is ‘economizing’ the universities tenure is increasingly being depicted as ‘belonging to another age’, as ‘hindering flexibility and innovation’ and as being ‘too costly’.⁹

The tone of the ‘Bologna 2020’ is somewhat less optimistic than the tone of the original Bologna Declaration of 1999, which is surprising given the general tendency of Bologna-related papers to posit only ‘progress’. This difference can most likely be explained by the economic meltdown since 2008 – thanks to the very same neo-liberal policies which the Bologna reforms are advocating.

Significantly, however, in ‘Bologna 2020’ we are searching in vain for any reflection on neo-liberalism or for any reflection on the crisis caused by neoliberal free-market policies. On the contrary, since the neo-liberal policies failed to reach the stated Bologna objectives, we only need to push a little bit harder in the neo-liberal direction:

„The objectives set out by the Bologna Declaration and the policies developed in the subsequent years are still valid today. Since not all the objectives have been completely achieved, the full and proper implementation of these objectives at European, national and institutional level will require increased momentum and commitment beyond 2010“.¹⁰

Now we are suddenly being told that Europe needs the Bologna Process because Europe is facing „(...) the challenge of an ageing population“. This insight into the fact that we all grow older every day is what the French call a *trouvaille*. Moreo-

No University is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom, New York 2010, and the forum, ‘What if College Tenure Dies?’, New York Times, 19.20.06. 2010.

8 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 26.06.2010, ‘Alarm auf Bohrinsel war angeblich ausgestellt’.

9 See e.g. the forum, ‘What if College Tenure Dies?’, where the chairman of the department of religion at Columbia University suggests in his contribution ‘Unsustainable and Indefensible’ that tenured full professorships require endowments of up to 28 million dollars in order to pay for their salaries at the end of their careers. In his view, this is clearly absurd, and therefore he asks his million-dollar question: ‘Why would academia be any different from any other profession?’.

10 The Bologna Process 2020– The European Higher Education Area in the new decade, 7.

ver, 'Bologna 2020' states that Europe needs „sustainable economic recovery and development“.¹¹

Why Europe is suddenly in need of 'recovery' – instead of the announced 'Great Leap Forward' – apparently requires neither explanation nor reflection. Nor does the fact that the Bologna Declaration of 1999 aimed explicitly to transform the EU into 'the most competitive economic bloc' in the world – nor why 'Bologna' obviously failed to do so between 1999 and 2009. The same goes for the obvious fact that the financial crisis did not drop from heaven but was caused by the unfettered self-enriching practices of identifiable institutional actors: the banks in general and the investment banks in particular.¹² Since both the Bologna Declarations of 1999 and of 2009 recommend that 'businessmen' run the universities, the 'bad news' of the financial crisis caused by the banks obviously does not fit into the Bolognese world picture. As 'societal stakeholders' businessmen like bankers (like the managers of Lehman Brothers), oil men (like BP president Tony Hayward), investment men (like Bernard Madoff) are simply presupposed to be 'good', irrespective of how they have behaved and in fact are behaving. Although everything in the Bolognese universe is ideally made 'transparent' and is being 'monitored', the model behaviour of 'businessmen' on 'the free market' represents the glaring exception. In the 'Bolognese' world view the free market and the business model simply represent 'progress' by definition – and when undisputable facts concerning 'business' don't fit into the 'progressive' picture so much the worse for these facts.¹³ So far for the Bologna concept of 'reality'.

The rest of 'Bologna 2020' mainly summarizes the objectives of Bologna Phase 1. The 'achievements' of Phase 1 are of course emphasized, like the introduction of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), as is the permanent 'modernisation' of higher education and last but not least: the permanent

11 The Bologna Process 2020 – The European Higher Education Area in the new decade, 1, 3.

12 See Michael Lewis: *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine*, New York 2010; Paul Volcker: *The Time We Have Is Growing Short*, in: *New York Review of Books* (2010), June 24, Bd. 57, 11: „The central issue with which we have been grappling is the doctrine of too big to fail. Its corollary is so-called moral hazard: the sense that an institution – its creditors, its management, even its stockholders – will be inclined to tolerate highly aggressive risk in the expectation that it will be rescued from possible failure by official financial support.“

13 See Tony Judt: *Captive Minds, Then and Now*, in: *The New York Review of Books* (2010). 13 July: „Our contemporary faith in the market' rigorously tracks its radical nineteenth-century Doppelgänger – the unquestioning belief in necessity, progress and History. Just as the hapless British Labour chancellor in 1929 – 1931, Philip Snowden, threw up his hands in the face of the Depression and declared that there was no point opposing the ineluctable laws of capitalism, so Europe's leaders today scuttle into budgetary austerity to appease the markets“.

improvement of its ‘quality’: „Striving for excellence in all aspects of higher education, we address the challenges of the new era. This requires a constant focus on quality“. The ‘quality’ of education is further specified in 3 characteristics: 1. as the increasing ‘social accessibility’ of higher education, 2. as a shifting focus on ‘student-centred learning’ 3. as the permanent ‘monitoring’ of ‘progress’ by increasing both the ‘transparency’ and the ‘quality’ of education.¹⁴

All this ‘transparency-talk’ signals that the spirit of Big Brother is omnipresent in ‘Bologna 2020’ and that his curiosity is never satisfied. ‘Data collection’ is therefore now mentioned as a new and separate policy aim of the reform process:

„Improved and enhanced data collection will help monitor progress made in the attainment of the objectives set out in the social dimension, employability and mobility agendas, as well as in other policy area, and will serve as a basis for both stocktaking and benchmarking“.¹⁵

‘Multidimensional transparency tools’ are to be developed in order to make everything even more comparable and ‘transparent’. The fundamental question of who wants and needs this ‘transparency’ so badly is neither asked nor answered. Big Brother simply doesn’t like to be questioned.

All the attention on ‘student-centred learning’ notwithstanding, student-centred learning in ‘Bologna 2020’ does not mean what the words suggest – implying that students are somehow central to the learning-process and that their opinions and wishes are taken seriously. If this were in fact the case the students would probably not be demonstrating in the streets in Germany, Austria, Spain etc. demanding to be taken seriously. No, ‘student-centred learning’ in the specific policy language called ‘Bolognese’ basically means ‘improving the learning environment’ and ‘removing all barriers to study’.¹⁶ According to the ‘Bolognese’ plans remarkably these goals can be achieved by the development of ‘ongoing curricular reform’, geared towards ‘learning outcomes’ and ‘employability’. And – this is just a small but telling detail – this focus on ‘employability’ allows „institutions to be more responsive to employers needs“.¹⁷

As in the first phase of Bologna, life-long learning looms large in ‘Bologna 2020’, including the recognition of skills and competences, which are acquired „through formal, non-formal, or informal learning paths“.¹⁸ Flexibility and mobil-

14 The Bologna Process 2020.

15 The Bologna Process 2020, point 21.

16 The Bologna Process 2020, point 9.

17 The Bologna Process 2020, point 13.

18 The Bologna Process 2020, point 11.

ity are still among the guiding values in the second phase of Bologna – next to transparency of course. And to make the issue of mobility more concrete ‘Bologna 2020’ stipulates that „in 2020, at least 20% of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad“.¹⁹ What the present mobility percentage of EU students is, however, is not mentioned – and this is an interesting omission because according to the protesting students, international mobility has been going down since ‘Bologna’ because of the increasing pressure on students to study fast and because of increasing pressures due to the frequency of examinations.

2 The ‘Bologna Process’ 1999 – 2009 as experienced by students: a view from below.

‘Bologna 2020’ is rather short on facts and my hunch is that this is not accidental because the known facts of higher education point in a quite different direction from the one this policy paper suggests. This observation leads me to the second part of my paper, that is to the experiences of the Bologna reforms as they have been formulated by protesting students, especially in Germany and Austria in the autumn of 2009. I am not suggesting that these protesting student voices represent the only voices and experiences. I am only saying that they represent a significant part of the student population. The strongest argument in favour of this view is, as we shall see, that it was also the politicians and university administrators in Austria and Germany who thought this was the case in 2009.

In order to find out what the student view on the Bologna Process is let me briefly quote from an AStA-student-leaflet distributed at the Universität Freiburg concerning a ‘Demo’ and ‘Bildungsstreik’ on 17th November. The leaflet begins with ‘Heute schon auswendig gelernt?’ and states the following:

„Die Ökonomisierung der Hochschulen ist im vollen Gange. Das Ideal einer kritischen, zur Reflektion befähigenden Wissenschaft wird immer mehr zurückgedrängt. Stattdessen werden Forschung und Lehre immer mehr den Bedürfnissen des Markts angepaßt. Das Bachelor und Master-System bedeutet die Unterordnung der Lehre unter die Bedürfnisse der Wirtschaft. Statt selbstbestimmten und kritischen Studiums heißt es nun Bullenmilernen, Verschulung und Dauerprüfungsdruck. An die Stelle von Bildung tritt Ausbildung für den Arbeitsmarkt: schnell, billig und effizient für die

19 The Bologna Process 2020, point 18.

Wirtschaft“.

So far for this AStA-leaflet from Freiburg. This analysis does not stand on its own because it is basically supported by public intellectuals like Ulrich Beck who recently criticized the ‘McDonalidization’ of the German universities and characterized the ‘monitoring drive’ of Bologna as ‘McKinsey Stalinism’.²⁰

In other publications the students were more specific concerning two changes they are striving after in order to counter the ‘Ökonomisierung’ of the universities: 1. no tuition fees because tuition fees contradict the basic human right to get free education; 2. more teaching personnel because the university classrooms are structurally overcrowded; 3. more teaching space because of the structural overpopulation of the (German and Austrian) universities; 4. democratic representation in the university administration and 5. the right to study for longer than the six semesters Bologna specifies for a BA.

A comparison of the Bologna communiqué from the ministers of education and the AStA-leaflet of students in Freiburg suggests one hypothesis which can explain the observed facts: the EU politicians, who are in favour of the ‘marketisation’ of higher education, apparently are living in a reality which is fundamentally different from the reality inhabited by the protesting students.

The evidence supporting my ‘two different worlds’ hypothesis consists of the fact that all of the fundamental issues, which the students want to change, are not even mentioned as issues in ‘Bologna 2020’. I am referring to (the abolition of) tuition fees, (the increase in available) teaching personnel, and (the increase in) available teaching spaces at the universities. So in the ‘Bolognese’ world of the EU policy-makers and university administrators it is possible to talk about the ‘quality’ of higher education without ever mentioning the availability of sufficient teaching personnel and teaching space. This of course is quite odd because everybody with even the slightest practical experience with education – higher and otherwise – knows of the crucial importance of both teaching personnel and of teaching spaces. There is just one explanation for this fatal ‘blind spot’ of the Bolognese worldview: the explanation is that when one talks in Bolognese about education, one doesn’t mean what the students and the faculty call education. Education in Bolognese basically means economy.²¹

Here I will only provide evidence in the form of examples in order to support

20 Ulrich Beck: Die Wiederkehr des Sozialdarwinismus, in: Frankfurter Rundschau, 5. February 2010.

21 The reduction of homo academicus to homo economicus is analyzed in depth in: Lorenz, If you’re so smart why aren’t you rich?, 41-67.

my thesis that in ‘Bolognese’ education actually means economy – elsewhere I have provided more fundamental conceptual and empirical arguments.²² The exemplary support consists of two recent journal articles published in ‘The Guardian’ and in the ‘Times Higher Education Supplement’.²³ The Guardian article bears the promising title ‘Pointless university studies to be weeded out by new government panel. Changes to government funding may force academics to prove that their inquiry has real-world relevance’. The article states the following concerning the situation of university research in the UK:

„The government is to stop funding ‘pointless’ university research, forcing academics to prove that their academic inquiry has some relevance to the real world, funding chiefs will announce today. Universities will have to show that their research influences the economy, public policy or society in order to secure the biggest research grants, the government’s funding body for higher education said. The plans are contained in proposals for a new system of allocating £1.76bn in government funds for academic research every year called the Research Excellence Framework (Ref). Lecturers warned that the move would restrict academic freedom by preventing speculative blue ‘skies’ research. It comes as the government exerts extra pressure on universities to focus on work that has demonstrable economic benefits. It also follows criticisms of some academic work ranging from the gender politics of Tarzan and Jane to surf science and ‘David Beckham studies’. From 2012, each university department will submit evidence to be rated, with 60% of marks awarded for the quality of their research as judged by academic panels, 25% according to the ‘impact’ the research makes and 15% according to the quality of the department. This will rate the department’s research strategy, staff and postgraduate development and engagement with the public. The plans include a U-turn on an earlier suggestion that the ancient system of peer review – whereby panels of professors rate standards of research – be scrapped in favour of more quantifiable measures, such as the number of citations of papers by other academics and the value of research contracts. David Sweeney, the director for research at Hefce, said: ‘The Ref will recognise and reward excellent research and sharing new knowledge to the benefit of the economy and society, and will ensure effective allocation of public funds. It will encourage the productive interchange of research staff and ideas between academia and business, government and other sectors’.“

²² See note 3.

²³ The Guardian, 23.09.2009.

The ‘Times Higher Education Supplement’ reported that this requirement of ‘economic relevance’ also held for higher education:²⁴

„[British] Government control and the influence of business over higher education are set to increase under a ten – to fifteen – year plan unveiled in the House of Lords today. Funds will be directed to courses that support economic priorities and science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects, while cash will be withdrawn from courses that fail to meet high standards of quality or outcome’, the framework says.“

The First Secretary (Lord Mandelson) suggested that outcomes under scrutiny would include graduates’ chances of securing ‘good’ jobs and the extent to which courses meet the needs of the economy. In the future, universities will have to demonstrate that they are teaching all their students skills such as ‘business awareness’. The strategy document also suggests that business people should play a greater part in directing university activities, helping to design courses and sitting on governing boards. Apparently in the eyes of politicians ‘business people’ still represent the ideal role model for all other areas of society. Given the widespread speculative and fraudulent practices of bankers, causing the financial crisis and the subsequent explosion in public debt required saving their banks with taxpayers’ money, this viewpoint has little empirical backing, to say the least.

So much for the economization of the universities and for the universities in the UK where the Labour governments increasingly identified higher education with economy over at least the last two decades. Therefore it was only logical that the Labour government in 2009 abolished the Ministry of Education altogether. Since then the universities in the UK have been dealt with by the ‘Department for Business, Innovation and Skills’.

I will now return to my ‘two-worlds hypothesis’, implying that the representation of education typical of the Bologna politicians is completely different from its representation by the protesting students in Germany and Austria. Both representations, as I argued earlier, are not even ‘anschlussfähig’. I have already observed that the demands of the protesting students could not be connected to the communiqué of the EU politicians. The reverse is also true: all of the topics which are absolutely central to ‘Bologna 2020’, such as: the permanent ‘monitoring’ of ‘quality’ of education, its ‘transparency’ and its ‘accountability’ are all completely absent from the picture and the wish-list of the protesting students. And when

24 Serious business: framework is unveiled, in: Times Higher Education Supplement, 3.11. 2009.

there actually is an overlap of topics in both worlds – for instance concerning the topic of the social accessibility of higher education and the topic of student mobility – the two views completely contradict each other. Whereas the Bologna politicians claim that the Bologna reforms are increasing the ‘social accessibility’ of the universities and also student mobility – without providing any empirical evidence, by the way – the students claim that the tuition fees are decreasing its accessibility and that the Bologna reforms have hampered student mobility. ‘Reiche Eltern für alle’ was written on one of the German protest-banners in the autumn of 2009 and not without good reason. So much for my ‘two-worlds hypothesis’.

3 The White Flag, or: the ‘Bolognese’ reaction to the student challenge in 2009.

This leads me to the third and last part of my paper and this concerns the reaction of the university administration and of the Bolognese politicians to the student protests in the autumn of 2009. This part actually concerns the question of what happened when the world picture of the university administrators and of the Bolognese politicians was disturbed by the world picture of the protesting students. For the sake of simplicity I shall restrict myself here to the case of Germany.

On closer analysis something quite remarkable and unexpected happened during the collision of the two incompatible world pictures and this remarkable event was reported in the newspapers. The remarkable event was that at first the university administration and the Bolognese politicians did not reject the critique of the Bologna project, nor did they immediately reject the wish-list of the protesting students. In fact their first reaction consisted of supporting the student protest, albeit to varying degrees.²⁵ So after ten years of Bolognese plans and Bolognese reforms, which on (policy) paper guaranteed the permanent improvement of the ‘quality’ and ‘transparency’ of the universities as we observed earlier, when confronted with criticism both the university administration and the Bolognese politicians immediately acknowledged that higher education was not in good order nor of ‘good quality’.²⁶ This fact in itself boils down to little other than waving the white flag

25 See for example: Streikbilanz, in: Die Zeit, 22.12. 2009: „Da forderte die Bundesbildungsministerin plötzlich einen Masterzugang für alle und erklärte die Föderalismusreform, deren Verfechterin sie gewesen war, zum Irrtum“.

26 Therefore I have argued in: If you’re so smart?, 165-199, that the Bologna discourses, is basically a ‘bullshit-discourse’ in the sense that Harry Frankfurt gave to this notion in his book *On Bullshit*, Princeton 2005.

immediately upon sighting the enemy. Only after some time – after consulting their public-relations specialists, perhaps – both the university administrators and the Bolognese politicians started to reaffirm the original Bologna agenda again and to reject the protests and the goals of the protesting students as ‘premature’ and ‘nonsensical’.²⁷

In the beginning the organization of the German university administration, the ‘Hochschulrektorenkonferenz’ (HSK), remarkably acknowledged that the universities were lacking sufficient teaching personnel and sufficient teaching space. The HSK, however, rejected the students’ rejection of tuition fees – that is the essential transformation of education from a free public right into a service with a price tag – and suddenly pointed – also remarkably – its accusing finger at the government and the state. Like many individual ‘Rektoren’ and the ‘Wissenschaftsrat’, the HSK now demanded extra money for teaching: over a billion euro extra per year. The universities were doing their best to solve problems but „Ihre Kräfte endeten da, wo die Verantwortung der Politik beginne.“²⁸ The intriguing question of how it was possible at all that in the permanently ‘monitored’ and ‘transparent’ Bolognese educational system – in which ‘progress’ is always *a priori* guaranteed – there is a shortage of more than a billion euros on a yearly basis for teaching was neither asked nor answered by the HSK. The Rektor of the University of Munich only made this riddle bigger by multiplying this shortage for teaching when he stated: „Es fehlen Milliarden jährlich.“²⁹ So far for the reaction of the university administration in Germany to the student protests.

And what was the reaction of the Bolognese politicians to the protests in Germany? Their initial reaction was summarized aptly in an article entitled – ‘Studienreform: Niemand will’ s gewesen sein’. It goes like this:

„Deutschlands Hochschulen befinden sich in der Gewalt bösartiger Außerirdischer. Vor zehn Jahren landeten die kleinen grünen Männer und Frauen in ihren fliegenden Untertassen zuerst im italienischen Bologna, dann auch in Flensburg, Jena und Nürnberg. Mit vorgehaltenen Laserkanonen zwangen sie die Politiker und Professoren zur Studienreform: Fortan sollte das Gros der Erdlinge nur noch sechs Semester bis zum Bachelor studieren, dabei aber nicht unter 40 Prüfungen ablegen und möglichst keine Chance mehr zum Auslandsaufenthalt bekommen. Aus Angst vor Strafrunden

27 See Die Welt, 24. 11. 2009. Note that the criticism of the protests against Bologna as ‘premature’ presupposes its ‘progressivist’ understanding.

28 Quote of the president of the HSK, in: Süddeutsche Zeitung 13.11.2009.

29 In: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 24.11.2009, 2.

in der Umlaufbahn kamen die Verantwortlichen dem Drängen der Außerirdischen beflissen nach. So muss sich die Einführung von Bachelor und Master wohl zugetragen haben. Wie sonst ließe es sich erklären, dass die Studierenden für ihren Protest so viel Zuspruch bekommen? Die Kultusminister haben vollstes Verständnis, genau wie der Wissenschaftsrat, die Bundesbildungsministerin, Unipräsidenten und Professoren. Man beklagt ‘handwerkliche Fehler’ und **erinnert die jeweils andere Seite an ihre Zuständigkeit**. Der Eindruck entsteht, die schlecht gemachte Studienreform sei vom Himmel gefallen. Kein Wunder, dass die Studierenden sich jeden Tag gegen die Anbiederungsversuche all derjenigen verwahren, die die Probleme zu verantworten haben.³⁰

So far for ‘der heiße Herbst’ in 2009 in Austria and Germany and the remarkable challenge to the Bologna agenda by the protesting students. As stated at the beginning the question of whether the protests will result in lasting changes to the Bolognese policies is still an open one. If appearances are not deceptive waving the ‘white flags’ in the autumn of 2009 represented only a ‘tactical retreat’ on the part of the Bologna proponents meant to calm the students and public opinion down for the moment. This would at least explain the inconsistencies in the reactions of the university administrations and of the Bolognese politicians which were signalled in the press. Given the fact that the ‘Bologna Agenda’ is inextricably interwoven with neo-liberalism – including New Public Management – it is hard to imagine how the core demands of the protesting students can be met without giving up neo-liberalism altogether. Given the continuing neo-liberal political hegemony – even after the economic meltdown since 2008 – and given the proven capacity of neo-liberals to ignore all facts that don’t fit in with their ideology, scepticism in this respect seems justified. Therefore we’ll probably have to conclude that the ‘Bologna Agenda’ will survive its 2009 ‘stress-test’.³¹

30 Tagesspiegel, 17.11.2009. Also see: Bildungspolitiker und Hochschulvertreter überschlagen sich derzeit mit Verständnis-Bekundungen für die Nöte der Studenten, in: Der Spiegel, 17.11.2009.

31 For the Dutch case see Chris Lorenz: Anything Goes. Debatteren over de universiteit in Nederland, in: Beleid & Maatschappij 37 (2010), nr. 2, 154–160.

